

07 The monarchy

The house of Windsor

Windsor is the family name of the British royal family. The press sometimes refers to its members as 'the Windsors'. Queen Elizabeth is only the fourth monarch with this name. This is not because a 'new' royal family took over the throne of Britain four monarchs ago; it is because George V, Elizabeth's grandfather, changed the family name. It was Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, but during the First World War it was thought better for the king not to have a German-sounding name.

Treason!

Centuries ago, when the monarch had real power, the only way to change the government was to change the monarch. People who tried to do this were considered to be guilty of treason (the crime of plotting to overthrow the state). If caught, they were usually sentenced to death. Because the monarch has no power now, this no longer happens. Treason is only a real possibility during wartime. The last person to be executed for treason was Sir Roger Casement during the First World War. Casement, who wanted independence from Britain for Ireland, had plotted with the German enemy to help make this happen. During the Second World War, nobody was accused of treason – not even Sir Oswald Moseley, the leader of the pro-Hitler British fascists. In fact, he was even released from prison in 1943, two years before the war finished.

The appearance

The position of the monarch in Britain illustrates the contradictory nature of the constitution. From the evidence of written law only, the Queen has almost absolute power, and it all seems very undemocratic. The American constitution talks about 'government for the people by the people'. There is nothing in Britain like that. In fact, there is no legal concept of 'the people' at all.

Every autumn, at the state opening of Parliament, Queen Elizabeth makes a speech. In it, she says what 'my government' intends to do in the coming year. And it is her government, not the people's. As far as the law is concerned, she can choose anybody she likes to run the government for her. There are no restrictions on who she picks as her Prime Minister. The same is true for her choices of people to fill some hundred or so other ministerial positions. And if she gets fed up with her ministers, she can just dismiss them. Officially speaking, they are all 'servants of the Crown' (not of 'the country' or 'the people'). She also appears to have great power over Parliament. It is she who summons a parliament, and she who dissolves it (i.e. tells it that it no longer exists). In addition, nothing that Parliament has decided can become a law until she has given it the royal assent.

Similarly, it is the Queen who embodies the law in the courts. In the UK when someone is accused of a crime, the court records will show that 'the people' have accused this person. In other countries, it might be 'the state' that makes the accusation. But in Britain, it is 'the Crown' – a reference to the legal authority of the monarch. And when an accused person is found guilty, he or she is sent to one of 'Her Majesty's' prisons.

The reality

In practice, of course, the reality is very different. In fact, the Queen cannot just choose anyone to be Prime Minister. She has to choose someone who will command majority support in the House of Commons. This is because the law says that 'her' government can only collect taxes with the agreement of the Commons, so if she did not choose such a person, the government would stop functioning. In practice, the person she chooses is the leader of the strongest party in the Commons. Similarly, it is really the Prime Minister who decides who the other government ministers are going to be (although officially the Prime Minister simply 'advises' the monarch who to choose).

It is the same story with Parliament. Again, the Prime Minister will talk about 'requesting' a dissolution of Parliament when he or she wants to hold an election, but it would normally be impossible for the monarch to refuse this 'request'. Similarly, while in theory the Queen could refuse the royal assent to a bill passed by Parliament, no monarch has actually done so since the year 1708. Indeed, the royal assent is so automatic that the Queen doesn't even bother to give it in person. Somebody else signs the documents for her.

In reality, the Queen has almost no power at all. When she opens Parliament each year, the speech she makes has been written for her. She makes no secret of this fact. She very obviously reads out the script that has been prepared for her, word for word. If she strongly disagrees with one of the policies of the government, she might ask the government ministers to change the wording in the speech a little beforehand, but that is all. She cannot actually stop the government going ahead with any of its policies.

The royal family

Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother This was the official title of the mother of Queen Elizabeth II. She died at the age of 101 in 2002. Her tours of bombed areas of London during the Second World War with her husband, King George VI, made her popular with the British people and she remained popular until her death.

Queen Elizabeth II was born in 1926 and became Queen in 1952. At the time of writing, she is the second longest-reigning monarch in British history. She is widely respected for the way in which she performs her duties and is generally popular.

Prince Philip Mountbatten married Queen Elizabeth II in 1947. His outspoken opinions on certain matters have sometimes been embarrassing to the royal family.

Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales, was born in 1948. As the eldest son of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, he is heir to the throne. He is concerned about the environment and living conditions in Britain's cities. He sometimes makes speeches which are critical of aspects of modern life.

Princess Diana married Prince Charles in 1981. The couple separated in 1992 and later divorced. Diana died in a car accident in 1997. During her lifetime, she was a glamorous figure and the public loved her. They felt able to identify with her in a way that they could not with other 'royals'. (She was, in fact, the first Englishwoman ever to marry an heir to the throne.)

Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall married Prince Charles in 2005. Her long relationship with Charles is widely believed to have been a major cause of his separation from Diana. For this reason, she is not very popular with the public. On the other hand, people are generally sympathetic to those involved in long-lasting love affairs, so it is likely that she will become more popular (or at least less unpopular) as time passes.

Princess Anne is the Queen's daughter (also known as the Princess Royal), and was born in 1950. She separated from her husband after they had one son and one daughter. She married again in 1992. She is widely respected for her charity work.

Prince Andrew, the Duke of York was born in 1960 and is the Queen's second son. He is separated from his wife, Sarah Ferguson (known to the popular press as 'Fergie'). They have two daughters.

Prince Edward the Queen's youngest son, was born in 1964. He married Sophie Rhys Jones in 1999. He and his wife are the Earl and Countess of Wessex.

Prince William (born 1982) is the eldest son of Charles and Diana and therefore the next in line to the throne after his father. He and his brother **Prince Henry** (born 1984), like Charles and Andrew before them, have both embarked on military careers.



Honours

Twice a year, an Honours List is published. The people whose names appear on the list are then summoned to Buckingham Palace, where the Queen presents them with a token which entitles them to write (and be formally addressed with) KG, or KCB, or MBE, or many other possible combinations of letters, after their names. The letters stand for titles such as 'Knight of the Order of the Garter', 'Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath', 'Member of the British Empire', and so on.

Traditionally, it was by giving people titles such as these that the monarch 'honoured' a person as a reward for some service. These days, the decision about who gets which honour is usually taken by the Prime Minister (see chapter 8). And, as you can see, the names of the titles don't seem to make much sense in modern times. But that does not stop people finding it a real honour to be given a title by the monarch herself! A high proportion of honours are given to politicians and civil servants, but they are also given to business people, sports stars, rock musicians and other entertainers.



The Beatles with their MBEs in 1965, the first pop musicians to receive such an honour.

The role of the monarch

What, then, is the monarch's role? Many opinions are offered by political and legal experts. Three roles are often mentioned. First, the monarch is the personal embodiment of the government of the country. This means that people can be as nasty as they like about the real government, and can argue that it should be thrown out, without being accused of being unpatriotic. Because of the clear separation between the symbol of government (the Queen) and the actual government, changing the government does not threaten the stability of the country. Other countries without a monarch have to use something else as the symbol of the country. In the USA, for example, one of these is its flag, and to damage a copy of the flag is actually a criminal offence.

Second, it is argued that the monarch is a possible final check on a government that is becoming dictatorial. Just supposing the government managed to pass a bill through Parliament which was obviously terribly bad as well as being unpopular, the monarch could refuse the royal assent. Similarly, it is possible that if a Prime Minister who had been defeated at a general election were to ask immediately for another dissolution of Parliament (so that another election could take place), the monarch could refuse the request and dismiss the Prime Minister.

Third, the monarch has a very practical role to play. By being a figurehead and representative of the country, Queen Elizabeth II can perform the ceremonial duties which heads of state often have to spend their time on. This way, the real government has more time to get on with the actual job of running the country.

The value of the monarchy

However, all these advantages are hypothetical. It cannot be proved that only a monarch can provide them. Other modern democracies manage perfectly well without one. The real importance of the British monarchy is probably less to do with the system of government and more to do with social psychology and economics ([The economic argument](#)). The monarchy gives British people a symbol of continuity and a harmless outlet for expressions of national pride. It provides a focus of reverence for those people who have a tendency to hero-worship. Even in very hard times, Britain has never looked like turning to a dictator to get it out of its troubles, and the grandeur of its monarchy may have been one reason for this.

Occasions such as the state opening of Parliament, the Queen's official birthday and royal weddings, as well as everyday ceremonial events such as the changing of the guard, help to make up for the lack of pageantry in people's lives. (There is no countrywide tradition of local parades in Britain.) In addition, the glamorous lives of 'the royals' provide a source of entertainment that often takes on the

characteristics of a soap opera. The separation of Prince Charles and Princess Diana in 1992, for example, was accompanied by vast amounts of discussion far beyond the possible political implications, even in the more 'serious' newspapers. Since the Princes 'Wills' and 'Harry' grew up, most of the press has been more interested in their love lives than in the implications of their military roles in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The future of the monarchy

The British monarchy as an institution has not been a burning issue in British politics for several hundred years. There is almost no public debate about the existence of the monarchy itself. Very few people in Britain would use 'monarchist' or 'republican/anti-monarchist' as a defining feature of their political beliefs, not even the minority who would like a republic. Most people are either vaguely in favour, or they just don't care one way or the other.

There is, however, much debate about what kind of monarchy Britain should have. During the last two decades of the twentieth century, there was a general cooling of enthusiasm. The Queen herself remained popular. But various marital problems in her family lowered the prestige of royalty in many people's eyes. The problem was that, since Queen Victoria's reign, the public had been encouraged to look up to the royal family as a model of Christian family life. When it became obvious that the current royal family, as a whole, was no such thing, the result was to give royalty a bad name.

The change in attitude can be seen by comparing Elizabeth's twenty-fifth anniversary as Queen with her fiftieth anniversary (her 'Golden Jubilee'). In 1977, there were neighbourhood street parties throughout the country, most of them spontaneously and voluntarily organized. But in 2002, nothing like this took place. The BBC broadcast a live service of thanksgiving but the occasion got no mention on the front pages of most national newspapers. In 2008, a government minister suggested that school children should be encouraged to swear an oath of allegiance to the Queen (in the same way that American children swear allegiance to the flag). The public showed little enthusiasm for this idea.

But there is nothing personal about this cooling of enthusiasm. The Queen herself is widely admired. And, as she lives through her eighties, this respect and affection for her will grow. She has seen eleven Prime Ministers, invited more than a million people to her garden parties and paid official visits to well over a hundred countries.

The one aspect of the monarchy about which most people feel consistently negative is how much it costs. In 1992, a fire damaged Windsor Castle, one of the Queen's favourite homes. There was public sympathy for the Queen, but when the government announced that public money was going to pay for the repairs, the sympathy quickly turned to anger. The Queen had recently been reported as the richest woman in the world, so people didn't see why she shouldn't pay for

The economic argument

Tourist brochures for Britain usually give great prominence to the monarchy. It is impossible to estimate exactly how much the British royal family and the events and buildings associated with the monarchy help the tourist industry, or exactly how much money they help to bring into the country, but most people working in tourism think it is an awful lot.



Edward and Mrs Simpson

For the last two centuries, the public have wanted their monarch to show high moral standards. In 1936, Edward VIII, the uncle of the present queen, was forced to abdicate (give up the throne) because he wanted to marry a woman who had divorced two husbands. (On top of that, she was not even an aristocrat – she was an American!) The government and the major churches in the country insisted that Edward could not marry her and remain king. He chose to marry her. The couple then went to live abroad. In spite of the constitutional crisis that he caused, the Duke of Windsor (as Edward later became) and his wife were popular celebrities in Britain all their lives, and in popular history the king's abdication is an example of the power of romance.

One's bum year

The Sun is Britain's most popular daily newspaper (see chapter 16). This was its front page headline after the Queen had spoken of 1992 as an *annus horribilis* (Latin for 'a horrible year'). As well as the separation of Charles and Diana, it included the fire at Windsor Castle and the news that Australia was intending to become a republic.

The headline uses the word 'bum' (which, in colloquial British English, means 'horrible'). It also mimics the supposed frequent use by the Queen of the pronoun 'one' to mean 'I' or 'me'. The headline thus mixes the very formal-sounding 'one' with the very colloquial 'bum'. It is impossible to imagine that such a disrespectful (and unsympathetic) headline could have appeared in earlier decades.

Two kingdoms?

Since 1999, Scotland has had its own parliament, and many people in that country want complete independence from the UK. However, it is testimony to the enduring popularity of the British monarchy that most of them do not want a republic. The Scottish National Party, whose policy is complete independence, says it wants to keep Elizabeth II and her successors as the Scottish head of state. If that happened, the situation would revert to that of the seventeenth century in Britain, when the monarch ruled two separate kingdoms.

The royal family is aware of this possibility. After 1999, there was talk that Princess Anne, who already has many special ties with Scotland, would make Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh her permanent home and become the Queen's representative in Scotland. However, this has not yet occurred.

them herself! In the same decade, public opinion forced her to decide that she would start paying taxes on her private income and some members of the royal family were dropped from the Civil List. (This is the money which the Queen and some of her relatives get from Parliament each year so that they can carry out various public duties.)

People continue to believe that the royal family gets too much money. Nevertheless, the monarchy remains broadly popular. They appear unconvinced by republican arguments that it is an outdated institution which prevents British people from living in a true democracy or that it hinders genuine equality among them. This is despite the fact that they realize the monarchy is an anachronism. Opinion polls show that, although the vast majority are in favour of the monarchy, they believe that Britain will not have one 100 years from now.

The Queen herself is aware of the public perception. After the fire at Windsor Castle, parts of Buckingham Palace (her official London residence) were opened to public visitors for the first time. The intention was to use the money raised to pay for the repairs. But in fact, the palace, and some other royal residences, have remained open to the paying public ever since. Since that time, the queen has also cooperated in the making of several TV documentaries about her everyday life. These changes are perhaps an indication of the future royal style – a little less grand, a little less distant.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Why does the British Prime Minister continue to 'advise' the Queen when everybody knows he or she is really just telling her what to do?
- 2 The attitude of the British people towards their royal family has changed over the last thirty years or so. Why do you think this has happened?
- 3 Would you advise the British people to get rid of their monarchy?
- 4 Is there a monarch in your country, or somebody who plays a similar role? If so, how does their position compare with that of the British monarch?

SUGGESTIONS

The Queen and I by Sue Townsend (Mandarin) is a fantasy in which the Queen has a dream about her country becoming a republic. It includes humorous characterizations of some main members of the royal family.

Books about the monarchy abound. Among them are: *The Prince of Wales: A biography* by Jonathan Dimbleby (Little, Brown and Company), *The Queen* by Kenneth Harris (Orion), *Elizabeth R: The Role of the Monarchy Today* by Antony Jay (BBC Books), *Diana, Her True Story* and *Diana, Her New Life*, both by Andrew Morton (Michael O'Mara Books Limited).